

# THE DREISER NEWSLETTER

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## DREISER'S APOCRYPHAL FLY STORY

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Those who have studied Dreiser's biography are aware of the paucity of evidence--letters, diaries, reminiscences of family or friends--documenting the early years of his life, a lack especially frustrating for anyone who wishes to investigate his late teens and early twenties, that crucial period when he decided to follow the calling of a writer. In his forties Dreiser began a chronological narrative of his life, beginning with his birth and carrying the story on through his twenty-third year to that moment when he finally concluded that becoming a newspaper reporter had been a false start and that his career lay in other directions. This lengthy and highly detailed memoir--the primary source of what we know about his early years--comprises the volumes *Dawn* (published 1931) and *Newspaper Days* (published in 1922 as *A Book About Myself*). For lack of more reliable documents, biographers usually draw heavily on these books, accepting as fact almost everything that Dreiser says in them.

Research carried on in preparing a critical edition of *Newspaper Days* convinces me that for someone who wants the literal truth that book can be a very untrustworthy source of information, that it contains many pitfalls to trap a trusting biographer into error.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, my conclusion is that when he composed this memoir Dreiser's principal concern could not have been merely to

chronicle his days but--as much for his own understanding as for the reader's--to sort out from a welter of past experiences the crucial ones which had brought him to where he was now at midpoint in life. In making this journey into his past in search of himself he looked for typical experiences which, from the vantage point of middle age, he saw as significant, hesitating not at all to discard or ignore what now seemed irrelevant, often reshaping past events in the telling of them, or merging several into one, much as he would have done in writing a novel based on historical prototypes. (His first intention actually was to call this book *A Novel About Myself*.)

It is not my contention, I hasten to add, that *Newspaper Days* is a fundamentally unreliable document. Most of it--its main sequence of events, at least--is verifiably true. But many of the illustrative episodes deviate from strictly literal truth: for example, his version of how he squelched the election hopes of a St. Louis mayoral candidate, or of how all in one night he covered a grand ball and a multiple murder, or of how he wrote up a New York City tenement fight [*A Book About Myself* (New York, 1922), pp. 154-55, 142-46, 483. Referred to hereafter as *Newspaper Days* or *ND*]. Numerous other instances could be cited. His alterations of fact are often rather complex--and quite intentional, I believe. They are not satisfactorily explained as simple memory lapses--although, of course, like anyone's memory, Dreiser's tended to blur the edges of what had happened twenty-five years earlier.

In sum, the lesson of my research for those who would study Dreiser's biography seems to be that, when they are hot for certainties, they should approach *Dawn* and *Newspaper Days* with caution, being advised that Dreiser--like Huck's Mr. Mark Twain--wrote what is "mostly a true book" but "with some stretchers."

By way of illustration, consider that story he says he wrote which gave him his "first taste of what it means to be a creative writer." (*ND* 413) in the spring of 1894, shortly after being hired as a reporter by the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, he says, his editor asked him to "invent some kind of feature" story and so he came up with "an idle skit" about a fly, "young and ambitious," meditating on its chances of a "livelihood or career. . . in a world all too crowded with flies." (*ND* 413) The sketch went on, he adds, with a description of how, in exploring its world, the fly "encountered within a modest and respectable home a shiny pate which seemed to offer a rather polished field of effort and so on." (*ND* 413) In the original, holograph version of this episode, Dreiser's account of the supposed contents of the fly story is longer by several paragraphs, detailing the various temptations and

hazards the fly met with in this household, until, harried beyond endurance by the irate housewife, it dove into her steaming cup of coffee and committed suicide (Chapter 68 in Box 136 of the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Library.).

So well did his boss like this little sketch, Dreiser assures us, that it led to his being assigned to write a regular column of such stuff, a delightful task that allowed him to explore many levels of the Pittsburgh scene and freely record his reflections on them--which experience, as he later saw it, revealed to him his aptitude for a writer's, not just a reporter's, career.

Reading his account of what this fly story contained (particularly the published rather than the manuscript version), a biographer might understandably be led to suspect an allegorical intention in it, to see the young and ambitious Dreiser dramatizing his own hopes and uncertainties in the character of the young and ambitious fly. Nor is it at all unlikely that the middle-aged Dreiser, recalling this period of his life with all its insecurities--mental, emotional, and financial--also thought that he had probably intended the fable to have some such underlying personal application.

When, however, we examine the story he actually wrote--a piece called "The Last Fly of Fly Time," which is reprinted here--we find it differs significantly from Dreiser's *Newspaper Days* description of it. For one thing, this story--which corresponds sufficiently in detail to the story Dreiser describes as to leave no doubt that it *is* the one he was remembering--was not published in the spring, the first of a series, at all, but rather in early October, the last of twenty-three ascribable to him. Nor is it about a young fly's meditations on its future, but rather about an old fly whose imminent death with the approach of cold weather gives rise to Dreiserian speculations on the reasons a fly might have for committing suicide.

A biographer tracing this particular passage in *Newspaper Days* back to its true source will thus find little justification for regarding the fly fable as an allegory about the plight of an ambitious but insecure young writer. What one has instead might be read, I suppose, as a reflection of Dreiser's youthful angst, a dominant mood at this time, he tells us, and undoubtedly the frequent occasion of suicidal brooding. (One might even note in the despairing fly's "Aw, what's the use of trying?" a curious anticipation of Hurstwood's last utterance as he stretches himself out to his final rest.)

Why did Dreiser distort actuality in this instance, claiming his fly story was the first of his *Dispatch* special features and misstating its theme? To argue that he was just forgetful is too easy. Perhaps a more sound conjecture would be that this one story of all the series was freshest in his memory since it was the latest. But elsewhere in *Newspaper Days* he gives quite accurate descriptions of the content and circumstances of many earlier ones than this. Perhaps he saw it as an especially good example of the kind of story he regularly did for the *Dispatch*--a seemingly trivial subject embellished with serious or semi-serious reflections. Or perhaps he remembered it for some special private significance it had had for him when he wrote it, which may have caused him in later years to associate it, symbolically perhaps, with that period of aspiration and depression. Whatever the case, this example serves as a small illustration of how the myth-making faculty that enabled him to create his novels also enabled him to reinterpret the facts of his past to explain why he had become the man writing the memoir.

Here is the story Dreiser actually wrote for the *Dispatch*, in a literal copy made from a microfilm owned by the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago.

[From the Pittsburgh Dispatch, 3 October 1894, 3.3-4]

#### THE LAST FLY OF FLY TIME.

It Clings Rather Fondly to the Wall  
This Chilly Weather.

NOW IS THE TIME TO GET SQUARE.

They Have a Suicidal Vein and Rejoice in  
Atrocious Death Ideas.

#### SOME THINGS WE MUST TRY TO FORGET

We are almost face to face with the last of the flies. That halcyon period in which dis severed wings ornament the strong and fluid oleomargarine and broken and extracted legs float woefully on the surface of our steaming mocha and java is almost past. Fly time, with all its glory of traps and deep laid ruses to ensnare the winged pest, is all but over. A few breaths of chill north wind have done for us what barrels of vinegar and tons of brown paper; what bolts of sugared and poisoned fly paper and triple netted fly traps have not--i.e. brought us face to face with the last of the flies.

And as we see him stiff, dull and rheumatic, his miserable legs clinging feebly to the wall; as we raise the family broom over our head and twist our spine circular wise in an effort to come down upon him with one fell swoop and even as unto a thousand of bricks, we pause, for we feel like saying: "Oh you villain! Oh you despicable and measly coward!<sup>2</sup> Now we have got you where we can get even. All summer long you have tormented us. All through the dog days you have sat upon our brow, and when we chased you off you have come back. You have risen each morning before us and sat upon our nose. You have gathered your companions and paraded along the ceiling and the window sill with a base drum, just to disturb our slumbers. You have even called in your disreputable neighbor, the blue bottle, and told him to go on and 'whoop it up' for us. Now, by the Great Horn Spoon, we will pay you up."

Sent to Fly Heaven.

"Aha!" we feel like continuing as the chill air from an opening door almost shakes him from his hopeless position, "Aha! you are not the same fly, aren't you? Oh, you driveling, shivering coward! You are one of him just the same. Now that you are alone at our mercy, you imagine you will whine us out of a few more hours of life so you can crawl over and die in our soup, but you won't. We will fool you. You think you will possibly live long enough to heroically spoil our pate de foie gras. Well, we shall see." Smish! Bang!! "Now, then, take that," and as we predicted we have utterly squelched the last of the flies.

If we will just keep our thoughts off the woes of the recent summer, we shall have some cause for rejoicing.<sup>3</sup> Everyone knows we were abused. Everyone knows that as we stand wrathful and broom in hand before the last specimen on this wall, that we have just cause for our ire. The fly tribe has heaped countless indignities upon us. Its members have harassed us until we would have given our kingdom come for revenge. Our house been a buzzing resort for leisurely and opulent blue bottles. They have joined us in everything.

But still we have some cause for rejoicing. All we have to do is not to recollect that Mr. Fly swung with us in our backyard hammock. When we went on our vacation he went along. As we fished upon the waters of the hidden woodland stream he sat upon our face and chatted pleasantly with the sociable dragon fly. When we carried home our trout he sat upon its glassy eye, calmly speculating upon the probable chances of its resuscitation. When we carried our grip to the return train he perched upon our collar and enjoyed the scenery while we busied ourselves trying to encompass his death. This is

what we do not want to remember.

### Delight in Death.

We know that the fly is a suicide by inheritance. Unnatural and untimely death is his delight. This has been a source of our regret. He seems born with an innate desire to depart from this mortal vale in agony. Desperate methods tickle him. The more he can shock the sensibilities of the dining public the better he feels.

If defeated in matters of slight moment he is apt to settle down on the table board and twit his wings as he morosely speculates. Chased from the sugar bowl, while pursuing his daily task of earning a competence, he says, "Aw, what's the use of trying? every hand is against me. Fly paper is at every turn. They even poison the jam to rob me of life. I'll die!" Accordingly he climbs up onto the vinegar jar, and looking down, says "Ah, beautiful vinegar, how calm, how placid are thy depths, placid and acid. Beneath thy surface is eternal peace. Farewell! vain world, farewell!" and in he dives, head first.

Chased from the cake dish, he immediately becomes despondent. "Terrible!" he sighs, "terrible! To be thus ruthlessly pursued from the cake. There is nothing left in the world for me now--nothing but blessed death." Looking, he spies the gravy and exclaims: "Ah, beautiful gravy. How delightful! How scalding! In a moment will I bathe my tired wings in your sputtering depths," and in he goes, while Mary removes the dish.

Not always is it grief that so prompts him. Not always the being robbed of sugar and cake. Pure admiration of the beautiful and sometimes absolute gluttony arouses the suicidal mania. Steaming coffee, sparkling wine, odorous beef arouses his remarkable propensity to commit suicide. Sometimes the sight of a crowded board, filled with all culinary delicacies, turns his brain. He grows delirious and in a moment of enthousasia topples off into something and ceases to exist.<sup>4</sup>

### Suicide in Coffee.

We can understand his feelings. Hungry, from a long night's vigil, kept to disturb the man who was dying for a little sleep, he comes upon the steaming coffee bowl of the early merchant. "Ah, beautiful coffee. Just my chance. What is better than coffee? Nothing." Cocking his eye over the rim he exclaims "there in my chance. Never again may I have an opportunity to bathe in such Java and at the same time upset such a gorgeous appetite as my friend here has. All flydom

will sing my praise," and in another instant he dives in and sinks from view. This is tragic.

Again it is the sight of so much. "Such opulence! Such abundance! Who could believe. Oh! this is too good. Life after this would be useless. One long round of miserable pickings with the thought of so much good gone before. No, I will not try it. I will not go along compelled to remember that once I had so much. I will just make merry here and eat my fill. I shall roll in bread, wade knee deep in delicious butter, dip my wings in the cherry jam, stride over the beef-steak and then lay me down peacefully upon the cake dish and expire." When the meal is finished we find the promise verified. His wings dipped in jam and peacefully folded upon his back, his eyes loosened by hot coffee, his knees marked with butter and beef and crumbs, we find him quietly resting beneath a mass of fruit slices, a clear example of the suicidal glutton.

This is what we do not want to remember. This is what, as we wield the weapon of death upon this morning, we want to overlook. We want to think of the fly tribe as have played in hard luck all summer long and then our joy in mutilating the last one will be keen and fiendish. We can look upon ourselves as ghoulish and heinously cruel.

#### Drawing a Moral.

The abstemious fly should be our thought. The fly against whom every screen door was shut and every fan was turned. The winged outcast who ever found the sugar lid down, the vinegar bottle corked, the cake dish covered, the pie dishes screened. The poor, forlorn outcast who singed his wings in merely approaching the beef, burned his toes in merely reconnoitering the pudding, crippling himself for life by accidentally lighting upon the butter. The miserable insect who was pursued by the housewife, poisoned by the fly-paper trust, fooled by the rat poison, eaten by the yawning lycopodium. How sad!

No, we will take that back. We can't be hypocritical. We are not sad. We are delighted at the thought. It was good for him, all too good. More horrible tortures would be contrived if only our genius permitted. Some system of wholesale slaughter would be to the point. "Oh!" we say, "Oh! for the man with an idea in this case." For instance, the summer frost maker. If we could only have a weather bureau that would be a weather bureau--that would send a 30 degrees below zero frost each summer morning devastating the whole fly race. If the frost would only damage the fly crop alone and

leave the fruit for our own blighting touch. Then would the millennium have come--but we rave.

All we can be is content with this morning. All we can delight in is that winter occasionally rolls round and freezes out the worst of Pharoah's ten nuisances. The fly on the wall shivering and alone, is all we can rejoice over, but we can do that--and slay him.

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<sup>1</sup>For a consideration of the accuracy of some details in *Dawn* see Thomas P. Riggio's "The Dreisers in Sullivan: A Biographical Revision," *The Dreiser Newsletter*, 10 (Fall 1979), 1-12.

<sup>2</sup>*as unto a thousand of bricks* "Vigorously, energetically, thoroughly, very quickly, with a good will." Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 5th ed.

<sup>3</sup>This sentence would make better sense if it read "keep our thoughts on the woes. . . ."

<sup>4</sup>*enthousasia* This word is either Dreiser's coinage or a typographical error. It is not listed in any general dictionary nor in the numerous medical, psychiatric, religious, or philosophical dictionaries I consulted. Its meaning, however, is quite clear: rapture, intoxication, ecstasy.



## IN MEMORIAM

Professor Robert Palmer Saalbach, 72, past editor of the *Dreiser Newsletter*, died on December 29, 1985. Throughout his professional life, Professor Saalbach was an active scholar and ardent admirer of Dreiser and his work. In 1951, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Washington, Seattle, his dissertation being "Collected Poems--Theodore Dreiser, Edited with an Introduction and Notes." Ultimately, this study became the basis of *Selected Poems From Moods by Theodore Dreiser*, published in 1969. Early in 1970, Professor Saalbach became the driving force behind a plan to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of Dreiser's birth by bringing nationally and internationally prominent scholars together in Terre Haute, Dreiser's birthplace and the home of Indiana State University, where Saalbach had taught since 1959. To this end, a Dreiser Centennial Committee was formed, Professor Saalbach serving as its Chairman. Through the efforts of that committee, Saalbach's dream became a reality when Indiana State University hosted a successful centennial celebration August 16 through 19, 1971. During the planning stages of that event, the Centennial Committee recognized the need for a publication through which to generate interest and disperse information. That publication became the *Dreiser Newsletter*, with Professor Saalbach serving as its senior editor from 1970 until his retirement in 1976. Since that time, he has lived in Florida, where his wife now resides at 4346 Daffodil Circle S., Palm Beach Gardens, 33410. In retirement, Professor Saalbach continued to serve the *Dreiser Newsletter* as a Contributing Editor. The *DN* wishes to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of this most loyal of Dreiserians.

# FARRELL, MASTERS AND MENCKEN ON DREISER: THE LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY CELEBRATION

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On November 26, 1946, Helen Dreiser wrote to H.L. Mencken, outlining the plans for a commemorative ceremony for Dreiser to be held at the Los Angeles Public Library on March 7, 1947. "There will be a very interesting Dreiser Exhibit at the Los Angeles Public Library in March. It is made up of all sorts of biographical material--photos of which photostats have been made, portraits, quotations from all the books, drawings, the Simone bust, also a collection of the old magazines in which Dreiser had articles and stories, manuscripts, etc. and considerable other data."<sup>1</sup> As one of the organizers of the event, Helen invited a number of Dreiser's closest literary associates to participate. Mencken, James T. Farrell, and Edgar Lee Masters could not attend the event, but they did send statements which expressed in capsule form their feelings for Dreiser and their sense of the value of his work.

Always shy of speaking at literary gatherings, Mencken replied to Helen's request with characteristic mock seriousness: "I am sorry indeed that I can't join in that display of beauty."<sup>2</sup> Though he agreed to contribute a brief piece on Dreiser, he was not sure what was expected of him. "What, precisely, do you want me to write for the exhibition? Perhaps it will help if you send me a copy of Masters's contribution."<sup>3</sup> Helen did so, and, sometime in February 1947, Mencken sent the two paragraphs on Dreiser printed below. To my best knowledge, only the first half of Mencken's statement has ever been quoted, first in W.A. Swanberg's *Dreiser* and later in Carl Bode's *Mencken*.<sup>4</sup> Both Swanberg and Bode assume that Mencken wrote the piece immediately after Dreiser's death and that it was meant to be read at the funeral service. In turn, this initiated the idea that the organizers of the service suppressed the eulogy because of its references to Dreiser's intellectual credulity and his life-long disregard of the "*mot juste*." Bode, for instance, says "It was a balanced judgment rather than the eulogy desired and so failed to be read at the service."<sup>5</sup> Helen Dreiser's letter, thanking Mencken for his words, sets the record straight: "Thank you for your statement

about Dreiser, which I have been asked to read at the Dedication Program [on] March 7. It is a very excellent statement and I shall be proud to read it. I only wish you were to be present, in person."<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the ceremony in Los Angeles provided Mencken with his first chance to eulogize Dreiser publicly. As was his habit, Mencken used the occasion both to proclaim Dreiser's secure place in literary history and to analyze the problematic nature of the man behind the books. Beneath the comments on Dreiser's personal idiosyncrasies lies the accumulated weight of Mencken's mixed and often contradictory feelings about the novelist. After Dreiser's death, Mencken had begun reassessing the rocky course of their friendship in a lengthy correspondence with Helen Dreiser, which began early in 1946 and diminished only after the critic's debilitating stroke in 1948. The statement of 1947 was therefore a kind of distillation of his private reflections on a relationship that had begun forty years before.

For this occasion, Mencken continued promoting Dreiser in the terms he had established as far back as his *Smart Set* review of *Jennie Gerhardt*.<sup>7</sup> For Mencken he was "a great artist," the most original American writer of his generation. Side by side with this, Mencken here voices his deeply ambivalent personal response to the novelist. Dreiser's philosophical pluralism offended him from the beginning and Mencken, always the rationalist, saw only the crackpot in Dreiser's tolerance for visionaries, mystics, and metaphysics. Moreover, Mencken read Dreiser's leftist politics of the thirties which clashed with his own stance as a latter-day Tory--reductively as one more expression of the will to believe in "various fantastic superstitions." Such notions, often expressed in Mencken's essays and reviews from the early twenties on, led to unresolved contradictions in his criticism. Given his immense influence as a publicist, these ideas also helped to set the terms of Dreiser criticism for decades. Within the space of two paragraphs, for instance, Mencken proclaims Dreiser a great writer and yet, "like Goethe [he] was more interesting than any of his books." The interest, as Mencken describes the personality, points to Dreiser as the type of "a whole generation of Americans--a generation writhing in an era of advancing chaos." If this defines Dreiser's place as a cultural phenomenon of the first importance, there is also more than a hint of the disdain Mencken felt for certain aspects of that culture--particularly for the "poor fish" who succumb to "Holy Church."

The statements by Masters and Farrell show neither the analytic brilliance of Mencken nor the complexities of a

difficult friendship. A younger admirer of Dreiser, Farrell came of age in a generation of intellectuals who, contra Mencken, found Dreiser important as a model of the writer committed to social activism. Though he helped Dreiser in his last days with the manuscripts of *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic*, Farrell was clearly more a literary disciple than a long-standing intimate. As such his tribute is less personal and more honorific.

Edgar Lee Masters, who was ailing in 1947, recalls out of the bygone years highly personalized memories and gestures. Masters, whose friendship with Dreiser went back nearly as far as Mencken's, clearly felt none of the tensions that developed between the novelist and his major contemporary critic. And so he could write warmly of Dreiser without the compulsion to come to a balanced assessment of him as writer and man. Rather he focuses on special moments, like the time Dreiser and he spent a day in Oakford, Illinois, as the guest of the local storyteller and fiddler, John Armstrong. His final memory is of the American Academy ceremony held on May 19, 1944, in which Dreiser received the Academy's gold medal award for his contribution to American literature. Masters accompanied Dreiser after Mencken refused to attend on grounds that the Academy was run by their old literary enemies.

On April 2, 1947, Helen Dreiser informed Mencken that "I sent the originals of your message, Farrell's and Masters's to the Los Angeles Public Library to be filed with the other papers in connection with the Presentation Program, March 7."<sup>8</sup> In a minor way, these short pieces reflect the range of Dreiser's impact on three of his most receptive and memorable contemporaries.

### I. H.L. Mencken on Dreiser

While Dreiser lived all the literary snobs and popinjays of the country, including your present abject servant, devoted themselves to reminding him of his defects. He had, to be sure, a number of them. For one thing, he came into the world with an incurable antipathy to the *mot juste*; for another thing, he had an insatiable appetite for the obviously not true. But the fact remains that he was a great artist, and that no other American of his generation left so wide and handsome a mark upon the national letters. American writing, before and after his time, differed almost as much as biology before and after Darwin. He was a man of large originality, of profound feeling, and of unshakable courage. All of us who write are better off because he lived, worked and hoped.

Dreiser, like Goethe, was more interesting than any of his

books. He was typical, in more ways than one, of a whole generation of Americans--a generation writhing in an era of advancing chaos. There must have been some good blood hidden in him, but on the surface he was simply an immigrant peasant bewildered by the lack of neat moral syllogisms in civilized existence. He renounced his ancestral religion at the end of his teens, but never managed to get rid of it. Throughout his life it welled up in him in the form of various fantastic superstitions--spiritualism, Fortism, medical quackery and so on--and in his last days it engulfed him in the form of Communism, a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the will to believe. If he had lived another ten years, maybe even another five years, he would have gone back to Holy Church--the path followed before him by many other such poor fish, for example, Heywood Brown.<sup>9</sup> His last book was a full-length portrait of a true believer, and extremely sympathetic. Solon Barnes, like Dreiser himself, was flabbergasted by the apparent lack of common sense and common decency in the cosmos, but in the end he yielded himself gratefully to the God who had so sorely afflicted him.<sup>10</sup>

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## II. James T. Farrell on Dreiser

I am very sorry That I am unable to be in California in order to speak at this program dedicated to the memory of Theodore Dreiser. On many occasions I have tried in writing and in speaking to interpret his work. In this manner I have attempted to repay my part of the debt which my own generation of American writers owes him. Theodore Dreiser was the great pioneering realist in modern American writing. He has left a permanent mark on our literature. All hail to the memory of Theodore Dreiser. He was a Titan bigger than the Titans of whom he wrote.

James T. Farrell<sup>11</sup>

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## III. Edgar Lee Masters on Dreiser

In 1911, when I was on my way to the *Thousand Islands*, I was reading *Sister Carrie*, which had been recommended to me by a friend. How thrilled I was, how admiring of the novel is shown by the fact that I sat down at once and wrote Dreiser a letter of praise and congratulations. For he had done what had not been done before. It was so true and honest. Thus commenced our association. About a year after that he came to Chicago, and we walked for hours up and down Michigan Avenue

while he told me of the novel he intended to write about the good man. That turned out to be, more than thirty years after, *The Bulwark*. Later than this he came to Chicago and we went down to Oakford in Illinois, the village where John Armstrong the fiddler lived, where we were joyously entertained with the fiddle and with stories from John. Dreiser was in a riot of laughter all the time. I have made a record of this experience in my book the *Sangamon*.<sup>12</sup> Later still than this, he entertained me at his place on West 10th Street in New York City, where a party in my honor was attended by many celebrities and many pretty young women. We had a glorious time. And I read to them from the *Spoon River*, which was then in its vogue. When I moved to New York, I saw him at times but not frequently. Once I attended a party he gave at his place on West 57 Street, New York City. But for the most part we enjoyed each other not at parties but in long conversations when alone. When I was ill in New York City, though he was ill himself, he came to see me. I went with him to the American Academy, where he received the gold medal with acclaim. One thing that his rough exterior belied was the kindness of his heart, his profound sympathy for the misunderstood and the disinherited. It was his integrity and courage that lifted him above the crowd of talented writers. His heart was thoroughly honest. He never dodged an issue. He spoke out against organizations and people who were powerful and had the chance to harm him. Still he went on his rugged way. I miss him more than I can say. If he were here, he would be writing me at times and coming to see me if it were at all possible. He belongs to the truly great American writers.

Edgar Lee Masters<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Helen Dreiser to H.L. Mencken, November 26, 1946. This and all other correspondence between Helen Dreiser and Mencken are quoted with the permission of the New York Public Library.

<sup>2</sup>Mencken to Helen Dreiser, December 2, 1946 [NYPL].

<sup>3</sup>Mencken to Helen Dreiser, January 27, 1947 [NYPL].

<sup>4</sup>W.A. Swanberg, *Dreiser* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 527; Carl Bode, *Mencken* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 328.

<sup>5</sup>Bode, *Mencken*, 328.

<sup>6</sup>Helen Dreiser to Mencken, February 24, 1947 [NYPL].

<sup>7</sup>H.L. Mencken, "A Novel of the First Rank," *Smart Set*, 35 (November 1911), 153-55; reprinted in Jack Salzman, *Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception* (New York: David Lewis, 1972), 61-64.

<sup>8</sup>Helen Dreiser to Mencken, April 2, 1947 [NYPL].

<sup>9</sup>Heywood Broun (1888-1939), journalist and novelist whose radical political views and conversion to Catholicism did not win Mencken's respect.

<sup>10</sup>The original text of Mencken's statement has not been found at the Los Angeles Public Library. Copies exist at the University of Pennsylvania and the New York Public Library. The copy at the New York Public Library has written on it, in Mencken's hand, "For Helen Dreiser, Feb. 1947."

<sup>11</sup>Farrell sent these lines in a telegram to Helen Dreiser, dated March 4, 1947. Quoted with permission of the Los Angeles Public Library.

<sup>12</sup>See Edgar Lee Masters, *The Sangamon* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1942), 93-105.

<sup>13</sup>Sometime before January 27, 1947, Masters typed this undated piece and sent it, signed in ink, to Helen Dreiser. Quoted with permission of the Los Angeles Public Library.

## REVIEWS

### DREISER'S CONSUMER SOCIETY

Bowlby, Rachel. *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

Rachel Bowlby includes analyses of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *The "Genius"* in *Just Looking*, which explores the impact of an emerging consumer society on the individual's self esteem and cultural values during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is doubtful that the seasoned Dreiser scholar will have his view of these novels significantly altered by Ms. Bowlby's treatment of them; however, seeing them placed in this sociological context, he will be once again reminded of Dreiser's sensitivity and fidelity to the dynamics of his own time.

In "Starring: Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*," Bowlby notes that Dreiser depicts a society in which the "limits of an older economy of scarcity and moral restraint have given way to the impersonality and boundless scale of monopoly capitalism, where responsibility is superseded by desire." In such a society, Hurstwood's identity is so much based on his dollar income and power to spend that when reduced to poverty, he is "content to droop supinely." Carrie, on the other hand, aspires to be identified with the affluence she witnesses while "looking" at The Fair, a Chicago department store, and on Broadway in New York. These material desires and a painful sense of exclusion motivate Carrie to the point that her self esteem depends on her ability to imitate the manners and more importantly the sartorial splendor of better-placed women. That she must violate conventional morality to achieve her ambitions is virtually immaterial. Ultimately, this life of role-playing leads logically to a career on the stage, which with its opulence and prestige represents the ultimate fulfillment, the most satisfying reality. *Sister Carrie*, then, is seen by Bowlby as a novel "of narcissistic consumer-actors, passively drifting up and down a line whose successive stages are marked by differences in the possession of wealth and



commodities."

In "The Artist as Adman: Dreiser's *The 'Genius'*," Eugene Witla's career dramatizes the merging of art and commerce. Far from adopting the idealistic, sentimental, art-for-art's-sake mentality typically associated with the artist, Witla is a realist in subject matter and philosophy. His paintings capture the ugliness and brutality of contemporary urban America, and he produces these scenes for the material rewards they might bring in the marketplace. Philosophically, he is constantly reminded by his failures that the softness of sentimentality or idealism--any suggestion of effeminacy--can destroy him. To succeed in the world of affairs, he must maintain the image of virility, be the "active, constructive man." In short, Witla has adopted the survival-of-the-fittest mentality necessary to triumph in the competitive world of commerce. He is the artist as businessman.

In contrast to Gissing and to a certain extent Zola, the other novelists Bowlby selected for her study, Dreiser was enthusiastic about the implications and opportunities of the consumer-oriented society. Though his novels reflect an awareness of the pain of the have-nots, who can "look" but not participate, Bowlby finds in Dreiser "no desire . . . to turn back from the perspective of 1900, which sees and celebrates the shows of a new material prosperity."

Richard W. Dowell

## DREISER'S CAPITALISTIC CITY

*Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*, Philip Fisher: New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, 191 pp.

In his fine study *Hard Facts*, Philip Fisher deals with three American novelists whose "transforming power" enabled them to establish enduring works which caught the central truths of the times in which they lived. For these novelists--Cooper, Stowe, Dreiser--Fisher employs the word "ordinary" and by it he intends to establish their command of "the universality of the everyday. . . . that which is central and accurate," in contrast to the extraordinariness of writers such as Melville, Dickinson, or James. The "hard facts" of Fisher's title are three indelible events of American social history: the killing of a man (specifically of the Indian), to depict which Cooper invented the wilderness as his archetypal setting;

the moral outrage of slavery, for which Stowe went to the second important American setting, the family farm or plantation; and finally the "severe evacuation and objectification of the self that followed from the economic and future-oriented world of capitalism." To depict this was Dreiser's contribution, and for his setting he employed the new industrial city:

These features of the urban world that reach their full est expression in the arena of the street draw their importance from the novel structure of experience that they make possible. The American map of this structure, recorded in terms of acting and murder, which are in effect two routes toward an identical extinction of the traditional self, was invented by Dreiser in his two great novels of the city, *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, novels in which he achieved for the city as a privileged setting exactly what Cooper had done for the wilderness. Dreiser invented the figures and the motifs by means of which the city became visible as a cultural fact in America. (138)

For the *Newsletter's* purposes, I shall concentrate upon Fisher's analysis of Dreiser's contribution, which he traces back to Walter Scott's invention of the historical novel. This genre, applied not to the past but to the present, is what made Dreiser possible, says Fisher, society turning into an economy which could then logically divide into "worlds" of work or profession with free, mobile individuals as their central actors: the worlds of the hospital, the courtroom, the theater--we know them all in 1986. When social life became economic life, money replaced power, and individuals replaced families as the novelist's concern. In the capitalistic city all things are, first of all, purchasable. Thus, for instance, Carrie Meeber, as an actress, is a commodity to be packaged and advertised and delivered, bought and sold. Desire is the motivation, and in achieving desire within the context of the city, the thinking process is displaced by shopping for what is desired.

In the final third of his book, which is devoted to Dreiser and titled "The Life History of Objects," Fisher brilliantly applies his thesis to *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. In what he calls the greatest sequence of scenes in the *Tragedy*, he demonstrates the manner in which Clyde and Roberta "shop" for an abortion, moving as they do through the streets (which in the city replace the "room" as a focus for drama), in so doing passing from one "world" to another--clothing store, drug shop, doctor's office--in their fruitless search for the commodity they desire. The opening scene of the

*Tragedy* is offered as another instance of the dominance of the street; and of course the trudgings of Carrie through the Chicago Loop in search of work come to mind at once.

Collective identity in the novel is more substantial than individual identity. Being "one of" the Griffiths or "one of" the Green-Davidson bellboys or "one of" the prisoners condemned to death, is a more precise matter than being Asa Griffiths or Ratterer or even Clyde Griffiths. The novel describes "sets" or bands, clubs or cliques. Many of the sharpest representations in the book are of days Clyde spends within a precise identity set. Dreiser brilliantly records the life of groups, factory workers moving through the streets to work or the camping trip of the social set. He is remarkably indifferent to kinds of life that cannot be described as on-going--activities or groups that one "joins." (143)

Buildings as well as streets become important in Fisher's analysis. The centrality of such places as the Green-Davidson Hotel and the Casino Theater as "terminal points of desire" is explored, as is the orientation of the individual toward the future, toward becoming something which he is not; as in the repetitive rise and fall of fortune, in which Fisher sees the rocking chair as a symbol. To assert that in the modern world "work" is transformed into "acting" is to suggest the full significance to be drawn from Carrie's choice of profession. But buildings are only an extension of our first outer elements of self--our clothing:

The Griffiths' factory makes collars, an article of clothing. All of Clyde's money goes into clothes, a more widely visible self than one's room or house which one must leave behind much of the day. Decisive clues against him at his trial are his two straw hats, his clothes and suitcase. Hortense offers to exchange sex for a coat, and in one of the greatest of Dreiser's scenes, Clyde goes in desperation to a clothing store to learn from a clerk selling him ties where he can locate an abortionist. (147-48)

In all, fifty pages of this modestly-sized book are devoted to Dreiser, and they are packed with insights which will engage Dreiser students and scholars, perhaps even stir up controversy among them. Fisher's arguments are coherently shaped, lucidly stated, and persuasively illustrated. I found this book to be exciting reading, deserving of very high marks among recent contributions to Dreiser studies.

Philip L. Gerber

## THE SHORT STORIES AND A CARRIE COMPANION

*The Small Canvas: An Introduction to Dreiser's Short Stories*, by Joseph Griffin. Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1985. 172 pp. \$24.50.

*A Sister Carrie Portfolio*, by James L. W. West III. Univ. Press of Virginia. 1985. 87 pp. \$25.00.

"I need a large canvas," Dreiser told an interviewer in 1912. "As I said, before I can go on I have to get a huge enthusiasm, and a short story is too small for the necessary run before the jump." Critics, it appears, have tended to agree with Dreiser as most of them have focused on his novels and few have commented on his short stories. Yet, as Joseph Griffin reminds us, Dreiser's "statement is more the expression of a personal preference for writing novels than the dismissal of the short story as inadequate for everything [he] wished to express." During his lifetime, the novelist published 31 short stories and wrote others that were never finished, or if finished, never accepted for publication.

In *The Small Canvas: An Introduction to Dreiser's Short Stories*, Joseph Griffin fills a gap in Dreiser criticism by offering a book-length study of Dreiser's artistry in this shorter form. Griffin begins his study with a brief history of Dreiser's difficulties in publishing his shorter works and of the author's early career as a writer of short stories. Next, he turns to an analysis of each of the published stories, discussing the eleven stories that appeared in *Free and Other Stories* (1918) in one chapter, the fifteen stories collected in *Chains* (1927) in the next chapter and the five uncollected stories published between 1929 and 1938 in a third chapter. Within these chapters, Griffin's analyses vary in length according to his assessment of Dreiser's achievement, but in general, each analysis presents the story's publication history, discusses its subject matter, sources and themes, surveys any comments that critics have made about it, and points out its strengths or weaknesses in form. Griffin concludes his study with a chapter on the stories in their entirety. In an attempt to assess Dreiser's achievement in working with a "small canvas," Griffin shows how Dreiser's works reflect the concerns of the popular fiction of his time but differ in the treatment of these concerns, traces the subject matter and thematic patterns in the stories as whole, and examines the

effectiveness of Dreiser's craftsmanship as a writer of short fiction.

Since so much of Griffin's study covers new territory in Dreiser criticism, it is difficult to disagree with his analyses and conclusions. A reader should be cautioned, however, that the word "introduction" in the subtitle of this study is misleading. Throughout his study, Griffin assumes that a reader is familiar with all of Dreiser's stories. Accordingly, he does not offer plot summaries of any of them, and frequently, he will compare a story he is analyzing to one he has not yet discussed.

Yet, if a reader is familiar with Dreiser's short fiction, there is much he can learn from Griffin's work. On some occasions, he calls attention to strengths in the stories that have been ignored by critics. One gains an appreciation of Dreiser's artistry, for instance, as Griffin outlines the wealth and aptness of the imagery in "Sanctuary" and "Typhoon." On other occasions, when dealing with stories that have received critical commentary, he offers new readings, as illustrated in his treatment of "When the Old Century Was New" as a parody of the historical romance, rather than an imitation of it. And most importantly, Griffin shows that Dreiser was a better craftsman in writing short stories than critics have given him credit for. Commenting on what he finds are five experimental stories in *Chains*, for example, Griffin states that they

reveal a writer seeking new and fresh formulations for his older visions and probably as well, attempting to solve what he considered to be urgent narrative problems: how does one write "pure" interior monologue? how does one successfully integrate inner reflection and outside occurrence and phenomena in the texture of a story? And although, with the exception of "Chains," these experimental stories are not of superior quality, they reveal a Dreiser both open to the need, and equal to the challenge, of extending his creative possibilities.

While Griffin's study deals with Dreiser's completed canvases, James L. W. West III's *A Sister Carrie Portfolio*, focuses on the difficulties Dreiser faced in preparing and publishing his first "large canvas." West's *Portfolio* is designed to compliment the scholarly edition of *Sister Carrie* published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1981 by supplying a "visual dimension" to the making of Dreiser's novel. For each of the stages in the history of the novel, from the day Dreiser first wrote the words "Sister Carrie" on a piece of paper while visiting Arthur Henry through the publication of

the first edition by Doubleday, Page and Co. in 1900, West reproduces pages of the texts and photographs of important historical documents that the editors of the Pennsylvania *Carrie* used to prepare their new edition.

Although this volume does not add any new information to the story of the making of Dreiser's first novel, it is of interest because it allows a reader to see examples of the revisions Dreiser's wife made in the manuscript and typescript, the cuts Arthur Henry made in the typescript, the corruptions introduced by typists and compositors, and the censorship of Frank Doubleday and his in-house editors. Along with these examples of textual changes, the book includes photographs of some of the real persons and places Dreiser named in his manuscript, reproductions of newspaper clippings and other works Dreiser used in writing his novel, and facsimiles of the letters that passed between Dreiser, Henry and Doubleday over the publisher's attempt to be released from his commitment to issue the work.

Intended for scholars, teachers and students, *A Sister Carrie Portfolio* offers a better understanding of the difficulties Dreiser faced in bringing his first "large canvas" to the public and a greater appreciation of the challenges facing an editor when he works with the texts and other documents that embody the story of these difficulties.

Frederic E. Rusch

## DREISER NEWS & NOTES

G. P. Putnam's Sons has announced the August 1986 publication of Richard Lingeman's *Theodore Dreiser: Volume One: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907*. . . . On the University of Pennsylvania Press's 1986 publication schedule, probably in the fall, is Thomas Riggio's two-volume edition of the Dreiser-Mencken correspondence, which contains 1200 letters and three appendices. The appendices include Mencken's letters to Helen Dreiser after Dreiser's death and documents important to the nearly forty-year correspondence between the two men. "Of the 1200 letters," Riggio writes the *DN*, "only some 240 have been published previously, so the collection will offer new evidence for a fresh view of the relation. I have divided the letters chronologically (from 1907-1945) into six sections, and for each section I have provided substantial introductions which try to give the historical and biographical background, and to make sense of the relation as it develops." . . . Also on the publication schedule of the University of Pennsylvania Press is T. D. Nostwich's edition of *Newspaper Days* and a companion volume of Dreiser's newspaper stories. The latter volume will include all the stories specifically mentioned in *Newspaper Days* and a sampling of others to illustrate the type of work Dreiser was doing during that period. "The companion volume," Nostwich notes, "includes material that, among other things, will serve to correct the misleading impressions Dreiser sometimes gives in *Newspaper Days* about what he wrote and what he did and will be, I believe, a useful source for future biographers. The plan now, as I understand it, is to publish both books simultaneously, probably in late 1987 or early 1988." . . . Professor Kiyohiko Murayama informs the *DN* that his book, "the first and only full-book-form study about Dreiser's work in Japanese," is to be published in the fall of 1986. . . . Harold J. Dies, executor of the Dreiser Estate, has reported that Stuart Thompson, Co-Executive Director of the American National Theatre at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D. C., has contracted for the stage rights to the 1981 version of *Sister Carrie*. "If all works out as planned," Dies writes, "it may go into production in late spring or early summer of this year." . . . In the Spring 1985 *DN* (p. 20), Dr. Neda Westlake, recently retired

Curator of the Rare Book Collection at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that a shaken confidence in her spelling of words with "i" and "e" has been a legacy of her long acquaintance with the Dreiser papers. Eight lines later in that article, the *DW* editors were embarrassed to find that they had failed to notice a transposition in the word "neice." You're not alone, Neda.